

SENATE BILL REPORT

SSB 5219

As Passed Senate, March 12, 2009

Title: An act relating to housing for populations at risk of being homeless, including those suffering from mental illness, those with criminal backgrounds, and those who may have chemical or alcohol dependency issues.

Brief Description: Establishing a focus group to examine the need to provide housing for certain populations at risk of being homeless.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Human Services & Corrections (originally sponsored by Senators Carrell, Regala, Hargrove, Kline, Brandland, Swecker, Stevens and King).

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Human Services & Corrections: 1/30/09, 2/20/09 [DPS].
Passed Senate: 3/12/09, 47-0.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES & CORRECTIONS

Majority Report: That Substitute Senate Bill No. 5219 be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass.

Signed by Senators Hargrove, Chair; Regala, Vice Chair; Stevens, Ranking Minority Member; Brandland, Carrell, Kauffman and McAuliffe.

Staff: Shani Bauer (786-7468)

Background: The Legislature has funded many programs throughout the state that provide housing assistance to the homeless, some of which focus on populations who are being released from institutions, have mental health issues, or have chemical dependency problems. These programs include:

- the Reentry Housing Pilot Program which provides grants to eligible organizations that offer supportive housing and services for jail and prison offenders who are under supervision and referred by the Department of Corrections (DOC);
- the Transitional Housing Operating and Rent (THOR) program which provides homeless families with children with up to two years of rental assistance, transitional facility operating subsidies, and case management to help them transition to permanent housing and self-sufficiency; and
- the Homeless Grant Assistance Program, launched in 2006 to provide grants to Washington State counties for innovative projects that reduce homelessness and

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demonstrate systems change by integrating criminal justice, social service, health, and other state and local systems.

Funding for some of these programs is recommended to be cut or not funded in the next biennium.

Many of the programs and its providers have experienced problems finding landlords who are willing to rent to these high risk populations. Some providers have resorted to developing their own housing through purchase or construction.

Summary of Substitute Bill: A focus group is established to address housing for individuals at high risk of being homeless. The focus group must invite participation from legislative members as well as representatives from the DOC; the Department of Community, Trade, and Economic Development; the Department of Social and Health Services; the Department of Veterans Affairs; and the Interagency Council on Homelessness.

The focus group is tasked with reviewing and making recommendations regarding:

- identification and removal of barriers for individuals at risk of being homeless;
- inventory and review of existing programs that serve these populations and advisable methods of providing housing assistance in the future;
- methods to encourage private landlords to provide housing to at-risk populations;
- statutory changes to the residential Landlord-Tenant Act; and
- quality controls to ensure housing standards for at-risk tenants.

The focus group must present a report of its findings and recommendations to the Governor and the Legislature by November 15, 2009. Non-legislative members of the focus group must serve without compensation and legislative members may not be reimbursed for travel expenses.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Committee/Commission/Task Force Created: Yes.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony on Original Bill: PRO: The homeless problem is more than just felons. This task force creates a group to look at the universe of individuals who have problems that keep them from getting housing. The group would also look at existing programs and reexamine how we are addressing these problems within the state. Changes need to be made to the Landlord Tenant Act so landlords can feel more comfortable renting to these populations. Caution is urged, however. Making it easier for landlords to evict these individuals is not going to stabilize the homeless population. Quality control is also important. Some of the current housing stock for this population is sub-par. The task force should also look at the Foster Youth Housing Program that is proposed to be eliminated by the Governor's budget. The problems that foster youth have finding housing when they

age out of the system are very similar to those experienced by the other groups mentioned in this bill. Sex offenders also need to be a focus of this group.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Jerry VanFossen, Washington Apartment Association; Jim Tharpe, David Beavers, Unity House; Time Seth, Charles Beck, Washington Landlord Association; Mia Wells, Washington State Coalition for the Homeless; Nick Federici, Washington Low-Income Housing Alliance.